

BURNED OUT



When Carmichael left to walk through the ruins with the forensic scientist he told Sergeant Andrews to stay with the jeep. Andrews obeyed, but didn't relax; he used the binoculars to scan the grounds carefully. Andrews was a scrupulous man; he didn't like being on bodyguard duty, but he wasn't about to get lazy – or to let his men get lazy – simply because he didn't like his job.

There wasn't much to see, with or without the aid of binoculars. The establishment had been obliterated; the roofs had caved in and the walls had collapsed. Everything that had been inside the buildings was reduced to powdery ash. The institute had been scientifically torched by people who intended to leave no traces.

"This is where they found the human remains," Burke, the forensic scientist from Ashton, told Carmichael, pointing to a mess of comprehensively-sifted rubble. "The animal stuff too. Even the bones were all but gone. We tried to use the teeth to check IDs, but it wasn't easy. We think there were five human bodies and two others, but I can't even be sure

that the others were chimpanzees. We have two premolars and a molar with fillings that match the dental records you sent through for Abel, but I can't be absolutely sure that Franklin was one of the others. I could only confirm the identity of one of the local men with any confidence – and we have seven names listed as missing. We may never know exactly who died and who didn't."

And by the same token, thought Carmichael, we may never know exactly which of them should be numbered among the perpetrators, and which among the victims.

He felt numb inside at the thought of the waste, the stupidity. Even if the lab had been doing the kind of work the anti-biotech extremists thought it was – even if its sealed chambers had been brim-full of armaments for use in the ongoing plague war – this would have been a meaningless act, a gesture of blind rage. Always assuming that it had been the anti-biotech brigade who were behind the attack; that hadn't been proved yet.

"As you can see," Burke went on, "we don't have

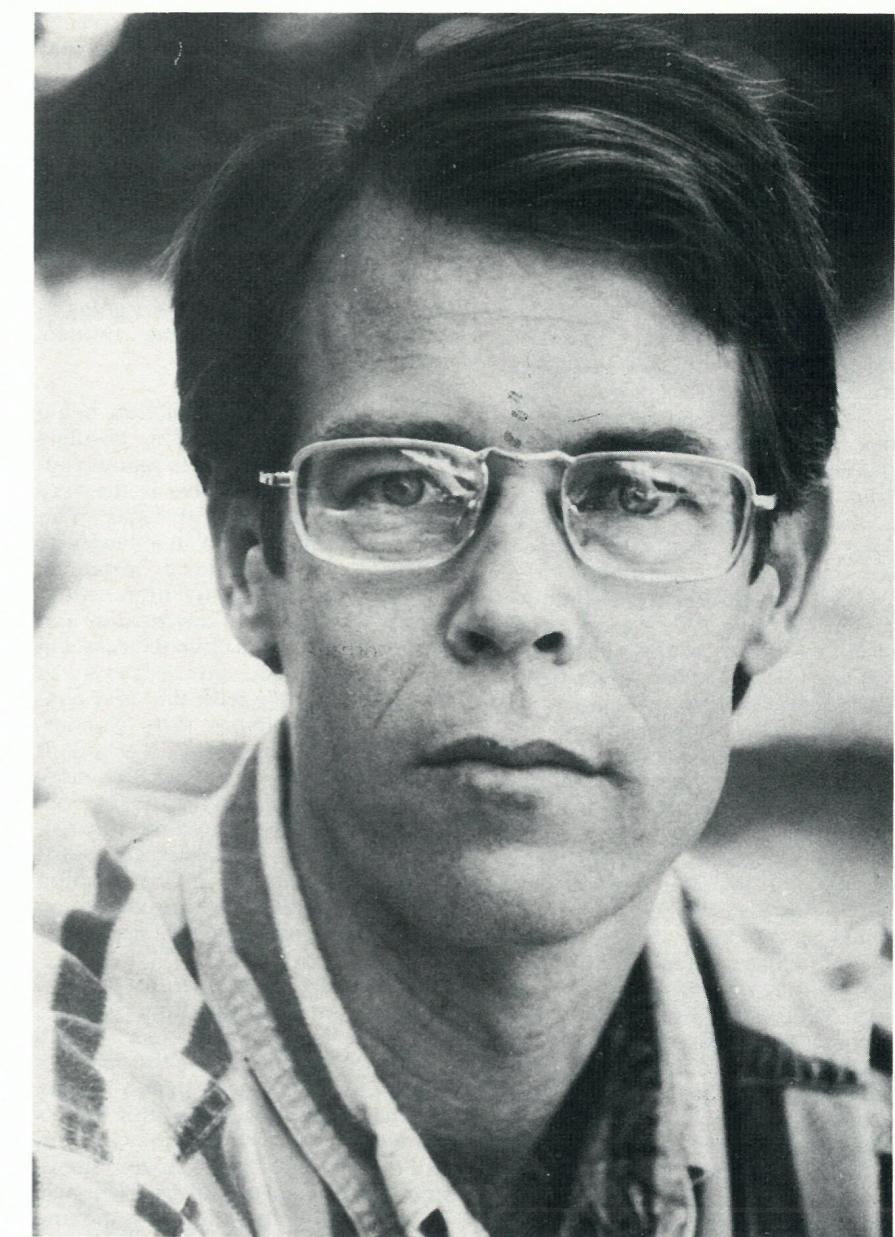
There are these two massive military-industrial complexes, specifically aerospace complexes, without a clear project any more. A lot of that ought to be turned to needed things on Earth, such as rapid public transport systems to replace cars, which the industry could be re-tooled for without throwing out everything they know.

"But a reward for the best work done by these firms in Earthly matters, the plum to be fought over by them, could be the Mars Project. It would also be a way of keeping that industry from crashing. We're talking about budgets of six hundred billion dollars a year between the two countries, and if we suddenly sucked that out and put it elsewhere it's not just those industries and those employers which will crash, but everybody else the money filters down through. We could have a post-Cold War depression of quite an amazing magnitude.

"So it would be a reasonable idea to sic these people on by sending a manned mission to Mars, and setting up stations there and on the moon. You might get a pay-off some day in terms of mining. You would certainly increase their esprit de corps in that they would have a project which was not only within their competence but also beautiful in its way. Going to Mars and setting up a colony, never mind the terraforming part of things, is a magnificent act that would be encouraging to everyone."

Of course there are many people who argue that we have enough problems here on Earth which the money could be better spent on. "I have a lot of sympathy for the point of view that says we really ought to get our house in order here first. But my argument would be that it is not an either/or choice. If we were fully engaged in trying to solve the Earth's problems, which we certainly aren't, the trip to Mars would be an expression of hope. It's not simply a matter of throwing billions of dollars at our problems here on Earth in order to solve them, because they have to do with the way society is organized in its most basic form. They are two separate issues."

Robinson says his trilogy is firmly in science fiction's utopian tradition. "Yes, very much so, although that isn't at all clear at the end of the first volume. Certainly the end of the first volume is a low point in the fortunes of the utopian movement on Mars. And there are characters in the book with utopian visions that are contradictory or in competition to other utopians on the planet. I don't want to give away too much about what happens, but I have utopian desires for this project, and I feel that eventually that's how it will be perceived. All science-fiction readers, in some part of their souls, are utopians. They read sf because they're



Kim Stanley Robinson

interested in the future. I would presume that makes them want to be better rather than worse. That to me is a utopian impulse."

When he was a child, was he enchanted by the idea of Mars? "No, I can't say I was. I never read the Edgar Rice Burroughs books, for example. I

wasn't much of a science-fiction person at all, really, except for the occasional Jules Verne novel. But when I did get interested in science fiction I began to write stories set in the solar system, and I found I always seemed to have an understanding of some vague Martian history in the background that I didn't have to work on too hard. It felt as if it was already there.

"I first became seriously involved with sf when I was an undergraduate and more or less by accident stumbled across a Clifford Simak novel. I had read some Asimovs and sort of felt that he was unique, but this Simak book

made me realize that if I could randomly pick out a science-fiction novel and enjoy it so much then probably Asimov was not unique. There would be more. So I dived into it. That severely inconvenienced my college work because I was reading tons of science fiction when I should have been studying."

Growing up in Orange County, he says, made him receptive to science fiction's attractions. "It sounds strange, but I think being brought up there was an important factor. Orange County was transformed from an agricultural place full of orchards into an apartment-block and freeway landscape right before my eyes. It happened in a few years when I was a teenager. It was a devastating experience, and I suppose it's the classic example of future shock."

"Science fiction was the first literature I encountered that expressed the way it felt to see that transformation,